

SENIOR MEMBER: LES HOWELL

By Barry Allison

This is the next of a series of articles by Barry which records some of the experiences and adventures of our many prominent Senior Members of the Squadron. It is an interesting account of the long sailing career of Les Howell.



LES commenced his long association with the sea at the age of 15 at the Somerton Sailing Club. The first Somerton clubrooms acquired were the Nurses' quarters from the dismantled Army quarters at the Wayville Showgrounds. This large structure was installed on the beach at the end of College Road well above high tide mark, providing plenty of rigging space on the beach.

However, on 18 May 1953 a massive gale demolished the clubhouse and 11 yachts – mostly sharpies. In 1947 the fleet at Somerton consisted mainly of VJ's and 12 Square Metre Sharpies. Les sailed a VJ named *Nereis* for three years in a fleet of 10 to 12 boats and moved on to the Largs Bay Sailing Club in 1951.



Viking

His first boat at Largs was the Heavyweight Sharpie *Viking*, which had been a State Champion boat, and was crewed by the McCoy brothers from Brighton.

Sometime later, Les purchased the Cadet Dinghy *Vandal*, which was beautifully constructed from western red cedar, and successfully sailed her for the next four to five years.



Vandal

In 1958 Les was involved with the building of the first fibreglass fourteen footer which unfortunately was not as successful as planned. Arthur Fisher and Norm Butcher were also involved in the development of this revolutionary craft. Later, Les was part of a group of five enthusiastic boat builders who constructed a Neil Cormack designed fourteen footer which was a double-chined plywood hull and was supervised by Norm Butcher. Les had two top crew in Colin Fraser and Colin Todd in those days and went on to win many races. This was the beginning of the new breed of fourteen footers to be sailed at the Largs and Henley Clubs.

Les was Treasurer at the Largs Bay Sailing Club during those years, and with Kevin 'Cats' Curry, ran the Saturday Night dance with the Gremlins as the band. Yachties from far and wide used to visit the Largs Club in those days just to attend the dance. At that time, a tax had to be paid to the Government on the basis of the number attending the dance according to the number of tickets sold. On one particular night, an Inspector 'raided' the Club and found a large anomaly between the number of people at the dance and the number of tickets sold. As was the custom of



Zefir

the time, it didn't take long to introduce the Inspector to the well-stocked bar at the Club and to 'assist' him with his numbers!

The highlight of racing fourteens in those days was the inter-club competition between the Largs and Henley Clubs – as well as catching up with Spen Chesterman, Brian Loftes and Ron Reseigh and the usual partaking of an odd beer or two after a hard day on the water. It was always a challenge to drive home with a fourteen footer on a trailer carrying a twenty-five foot mast with plenty of overhang!

After many years in dinghies, Les joined the Squadron on 8 May 1963 and bought the Tumblaren *Zefir* from Ian Wood. *Zefir* was originally built by Bob Stevens in 1952 and Les raced her successfully for the next five years. Keith Flint, who sailed another Tumblaren *Zanet* at this time, was very helpful to Les in introducing him to the Squadron and the fleet of six Tums sailing in those years.



Allouette

In 1968, Les decided to build his own yacht *Helen Wynne* which was a Warwick Hood design. She was a round bottom 32 foot steel hull which was built by Metalcraft in Port Adelaide, and he was ably assisted by Ray Cauchi (Ray was Jim Taylor's son-in-law). Les fitted her out himself and installed a 2-cylinder 15 hp Yanmar engine. Then followed many years of racing and cruising, including the Adelaide to Port Lincoln races, and numerous Kangaroo Island and overnight races.

On one particular race at night with the fleet very near the Orontes Beacon, a thunderstorm with massive lightning strikes enveloped the fleet. One crewman was heard to yell out "Don't knock the bleeding thing down"!

On the last Kangaroo Island race Les sailed, the start was on a Friday night in a full gale, and to this day Les still does not understand why they even started. However, out from

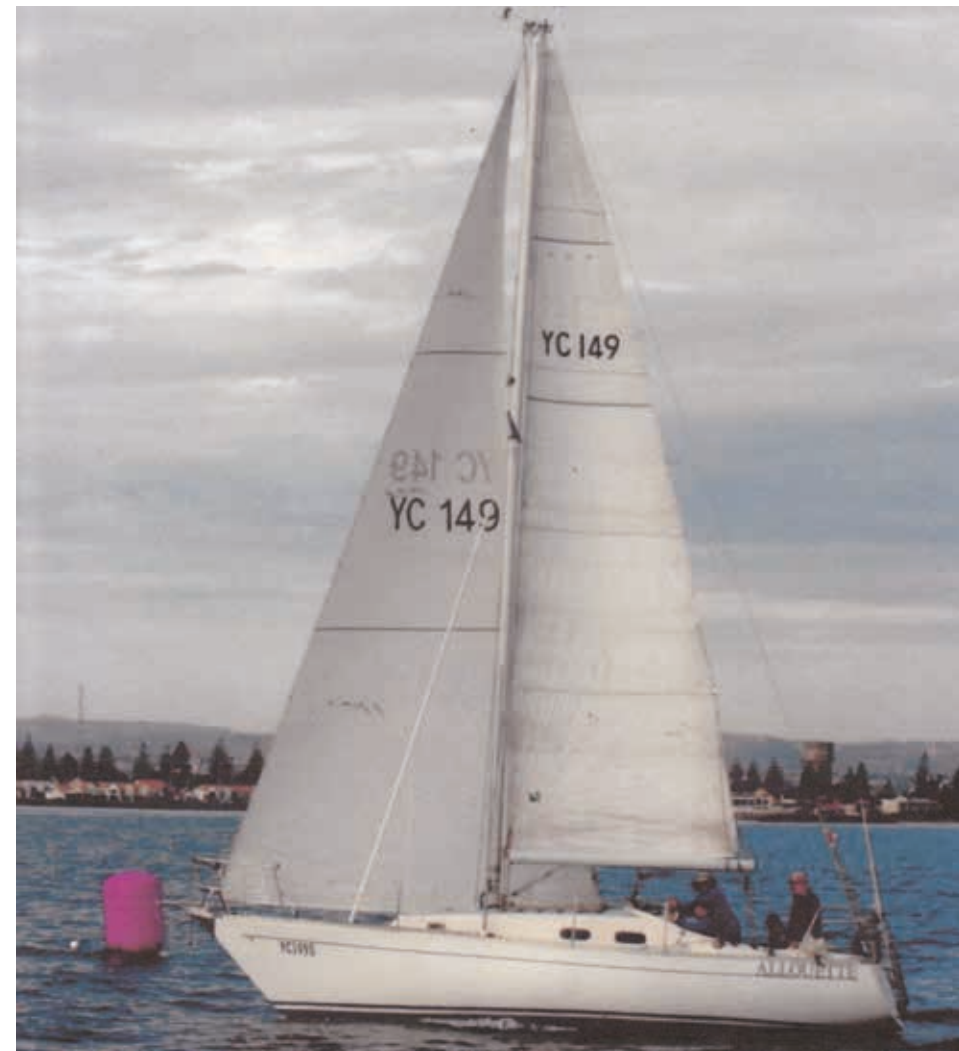
Port Noarlunga they pushed on, not being able to see a thing, with waves breaking over the top and the keel-stepped mast and a hatch leaking. When they reached Cape Jervis, a small cargo ship came around the corner and Les had to relieve the helmsman at the tiller as they were not sure if the ship had seen them. They then pushed on to the rounding mark at American River and up the Gulf towards the Orontes Beacon, when the wind died to a flat calm with drizzling rain. At this point, the ship's compass burst into flames, and was fortunately quickly extinguished. At the Orontes, it was decided to start the motor and head back to the Squadron, with Les heard to be muttering that this was definitely his last ocean race! In 1998, Les decided to sell *Helen Wynne* after 30 years of solid competition.

After a short spell without a boat, the Pion 30 *Allouette* came on the market and in March 1999 Les decided that this was to be his next yacht. At this time there was one other Pion 30 sailing in the Squadron fleet which provided some close competition, but now *Allouette* is the only Squadron Pion 30 racing. French Bread from the CYC does provide some competition from time to time. *Allouette* has been competing in most Division 2 races ever since, with mixed success. However, Les finds

it increasingly difficult to compete with the Division 2 boats and would favour a Division 3 to be re-introduced to the Squadron fleet. This may even bring back some of those half tonners that sit on moorings on Saturday afternoons, and even the odd 30 footer from neighbouring Clubs. (This is a project of Brian Snowden who believes there is a good chance of developing a fleet of half tonners again at the Squadron.) Les has a regular crew comprising Simon Taylor (his stepson), Tim Andrews, Richard Tapping and Gen Thompson, who loves the sparkling waters and the dolphins, and more recently Terri George, who has been crewing occasionally. Les is fortunate that Richard drives down to the Squadron and prepares *Allouette* well in advance of the remaining crew arriving.

Les has been actively involved in the Squadron for more than 52 years and has been Chairman of the Racing Committee.

Today Les is happily retired, having had a very active working life in the accounting field with Breotex and AutoParts. He retired in 1995 and today spends many delightful days on his property near Williamstown. He is also an active participant of the Wednesday Squadron Barbecue Team and is looking forward to another year of sailing. We wish him well in the coming years.



Allouette